

Online Symposium: 'Art, Space & the Public(s): What about Democracy?!'

17/18 March 2025, Catholic Private University Linz (A)

Concept & Organisation: Siglinde Lang, Assistant Professor, Institute for Contemporary Art & Media

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As a prelude to the BIP Spring Academy 'Art, Space & Public(s)', this online symposium provides an introduction to key terms relating to public(s), the public sphere, and public art. These terms are analysed in the context of democratic processes, their opportunities, as well as their challenges: What is the current state of democracy – in the face of increasing global political uncertainties? How is our understanding of the public sphere changing (as a result)? What are public spaces – in times of social media and fake news? What and how can the arts contribute to ensuring that public art fosters democratic processes?

Three thematic blocks address these questions: Block A focuses on the question of 'What is the Public, and Why Does It Matter for Democracy?' (Lukas Kaelin, Agustin Rodriguez, Remmon Barbaza); Block B 'Public Art in Specific (Anti-)Democratic Contexts' deals with nationally specific issues of art in public spaces (Barbara Balen, Gabriella Uhl, Ann Leanen, Cezara Carla Pădurean); and Block C is dedicated to 'Art in Public Spaces' and its potential for 'Fostering Democracy?' (Andrej Mirčev, Siglinde Lang, Annelys De Vet).

Welcome & Opening

Monday, 17 March 2025, 14:00–14:15

Block A // Focus: What is the Public, and Why Does It Matter for Democracy?

Monday, 17 March 2025, 14:15–17:00 // Moderation: Lukas Kaelin

14:15–15:00	Lukas Kaelin: The Democratic Significance of the Public Sphere
15:00–15:45	Agustin Rodriguez: The Public Sphere in a Multiverse of Reason
(15-minute break)	
16:00–16:45	Remmon Barbaza: Mobility and the Role of the Public in the City
16:45–17:00	Final Discussion

Block B // Focus: Public Art – In Specific (Anti-)Democratic Contexts

Tuesday, 18 March 2025, 9:00–12:30 // Moderation: Siglinde Lang

9:00–9:45	Barbara Balen: Changes in Street Names of the City of Osijek during the 20th Century: Historical and Ideological Re-naming and Its Impact on Public Space
9:45–10:30	Gabriella Uhl: Hungarian Biennials and Festivals: Possibilities for Public Memory
(15-minute break)	
10:30–11:15	Ann Laenen: Social Practices in Arts and Design – Sint Lucas Antwerpen as a Public Institution
11:15–12:00	Cezara Carla Pădurean: Experiencing Urban Space Through All Your Senses: A Multisensory Cartography of Timișoara
12:00–12:30	Final Discussion

Block C // Focus: Art in Public Spaces – Fostering Democracy?

Tuesday, 18 March 2025, 14:00–17:00, Moderation: Siglinde Lang/N.N.

14:00–14:45	Andrej Mirčev: The Culture Wars and the Public Sphere in Post-Socialist Europe
14:45–15:30	Siglinde Lang/N.N.: Public Art Projects in Rural Areas: Spaces for Encounters
(15-minute break)	
15:45–16:30	Annelys de Vet: Disarming Design: Politics of Participatory Practices
16:30–17:00	Final Debate & Statements

Welcome & Opening

Monday, 17 March 2025, 14:00–14:15

Siglinde Lang briefly introduces the concept, all speakers, and the idea behind the symposium.

Siglinde Lang (PhD) is assistant professor at the Institute for Contemporary Art & Media (CU Linz). Her research focuses on Public Art & Participatory Art. In addition, she works as a curator, lecturer, and author.

Block A // Focus: What is the Public, and Why Does It Matter for Democracy?

Monday, 17 March 2025, 14:15–17:00 // Concept and moderation: Lukas Kaelin

The first block is dedicated to the fundamental questions of what the public sphere and public space are, and what significance they have for democracy. At the heart of these questions is the juxtaposition of privacy and the public sphere, the historically evolved form of public space and the public sphere, and the process of transformation the public sphere is undergoing through changing media and digitalization.

The Democratic Significance of the Public Sphere (Lukas Kaelin)

The public sphere plays a key role in the democratic organisation of a modern political community. The term ‘public sphere’ refers to a realm that allows citizens to speak and be heard, to voice their opinions, to identify issues of public importance, and to look for remedies for social problems. In small communities, the public sphere takes on the shape of a literal town square, where people can meet face-to-face. In larger communities, a communicative infrastructure (like newspapers or digital platforms) is required to foster such an exchange of information and ideas and to bring about an informed public opinion. The presentation will focus on the democratic significance of the public sphere by presenting its philosophical theories as put forward by John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas as well as its radical transformation in the digital age.

Dr. habil. Lukas Kaelin is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Vienna. In 2024, he completed his habilitation under the title “Filtermacht. On the Digital Transformation of the Political Public Sphere”.

Rebuilding Solidarity in a Plurality of World and a Multiverse of Rationalities (Agustin Rodriguez)

This lecture will be a discussion on the nature of contemporary societies as a multiverse of reason and the necessity of harnessing the dynamism of that plurality in building a shared world. As the global community breaks apart with conflicting ideologies and conceptions of the good, the need to find a shared world will lead us to creative collective action. Democratic processes founded on discourse and a shared quest for articulating a common good still pave a path for humanity to respond to the challenges of the quickly changing world where traditional grounds of solidarity and the common good are being lost to us. We need to articulate ways of dwelling in the world with others in a shared effort to build communities working for a shared conception of the good within the multiverse of rationalities.

Agustin Rodriguez, PhD, is professor at the Department of Philosophy at the School of Humanities of the Ateneo de Manila University. His research interests include social and political philosophy, especially with regard to the plurality of competing rationalities.

Mobility and the Role of the Public in the City (Remmon Barbaza)

This presentation discusses the thesis that a city's vitality rests on the power of the public and that, in turn, the power of the public rests, in large part, on mobility in public spaces. The life of the city depends on mobility in the same way that our life depends on the circulatory system of our bodies, through which oxygen and nutrients are distributed and waste is collected and disposed of. The public must constantly be engaged in the life of the city in two ways, positively and negatively. First, positively, by taking part in public discussions on common concerns and participating in civic events, thereby making themselves heard. Second, negatively, by pushing back against abuse of power or corruption, keeping watch and holding those in power accountable, and fighting against disinformation (akin to our blood collecting and disposing of waste). Like our cardiovascular system, the system of mobility within a city (infrastructure, urban design, public services, etc.) is a critical area of public engagement on which the very life of the city depends.

Remmon Barbaza, PhD, is professor at the Department of Philosophy at the School of Humanities of the Ateneo de Manila University. His interdisciplinary research interests include Heidegger, language, translation, technology, the environment – and the city.

Block B // Focus: Public Art – In Specific (Anti-)Democratic Contexts

Tuesday, 18 March 2025, 9:00–12:30 // Moderation: Siglinde Lang

In cooperation with all BIP partners involved in the Spring Academy, the second block is dedicated to individual and nationally specific themes of art in public spaces.

Changes in Street Names of the City of Osijek during the 20th Century: Historical and Ideological Re-naming and Its Impact on Public Space (Barbara Balen)

This presentation analyses diachronic changes in street terminology in selected districts of Osijek in the 20th century using available cartographic archive maps. Cartographic maps are the key for identifying specific changes in street terminology, as they can be seen as a paradigm of historical and contemporary situations. Street names convey information about regime changes that involve changes of direction in the ideological reorientation of society and gradual changes in the identity of the city and its public space. The available analogue cartographic maps of the city of Osijek from the State Archives in Osijek serve as a basis for the analysis of spatial and temporal changes of street names caused by historical and ideological changes. The analysis shows how political changes have influenced the street terminology in a given period and the extent to which a political regime has tried to impose its ideology through changes in street terminology.

Barbara Balen, PhD, is assistant professor and postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Art History at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek. She was coordinator of several international festivals organised by the former Academy of Arts in Osijek.

Hungarian Biennials and Festivals: Possibilities for Public Memory (Gabriella Uhl)

This talk examines the function of public artworks in the context of remembering and forgetting. It will consider works presented at an increasing number of public biennials and festivals. It will argue that the process of 'institutionalisation' creates further contexts for the development of meaning, because the explicit objective of these exhibitions and events is to map, connect, and set in motion the hidden histories of a given public or urban space. In order to gain an insight into the phenomenon of public art in an international context, I will examine the works and events of Flaszter (Sidewalk), the first Budapest Biennale for Contemporary Public Art. In this study, I will draw upon the ideas of Michel Foucault (as presented in his work 'Of Other Spaces') and David Seamon (as presented in his book *Phenomenological Perspectives on Place*) to examine the representation of spatial histories and the possibilities and forms of sign-leaving in urban space. In particular, I will analyse the installations of Luca Petrányi.

Gabriella Uhl, PhD, is professor of art history at Károli Gáspár University of Reformed Church in Hungary. Her research focuses on contemporary art, especially Roma art from the decolonisation theory or perspective. She works as a freelance curator and critic as well.

Social Practices in Arts and Design – Sint Lucas Antwerpen as a Public Institution (Ann Laenen)

This talk follows an understanding of Sint Lucas Antwerpen – School of Arts as a public, discursive, and democratic institution. It focuses on questions of relationality, collaboration, and political urgency as forms that can be activated as critical practice, as a way of rethinking the role of an artist or designer. Via several examples areas of ethical, contextual, and political concerns are discussed, and patterns of power and universalism are deconstructed. Thereby, alternative models and methodologies for sustainable ways of working with others will be provided.

Ann Laenen, PhD, is the director of Sint Lucas Antwerpen. Before that, she worked for many years as an international cultural manager and (guest-)lecturer in the field of Active Design Thinking.

Experiencing Urban Space Through All Your Senses: A Multisensory Cartography of Timișoara (Carla Pădurean)

This presentation highlights the research project 'Visual Data Information – Multisensory Cartography Experience', which delves into the multisensory perception of urban spaces. It explores how residents interact with and experience cities through sight, sound, smell, and touch. Using Timișoara, Romania, as a case study, the discussion illustrates how sensory experiences influence residents' perceptions of their environment and shape their daily lives. The talk addresses the role of multisensory perception in defining urban experiences, examines the connection between sensory stimuli and urban form, and showcases how these insights can enhance the quality of life in the city.

Cezara Carla Pădurean is university assistant at the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Western Timișoara. Her ongoing PhD project combines infographic design and data visualisation with methods of exploring and presenting demographic data in an inclusive and visually appealing manner.

Block C // Focus: Art in Public Spaces – Fostering Democracy?

Tuesday, 18 March 2025, 14:00–17:00, Moderation: Laura Braspenning

Especially after 1945, art in public spaces has (always) been seen as an impulse for public debates – sometimes provocative and conflictual, sometimes unifying and community-building. Today, the resonance often seems to be stifled by political defence – or public art projects tend to primarily address an inherent art community. In terms of a democratic understanding of ‘public’, the question arises: What is the significance of art in public spaces, and what potential does it have to promote democracy (nowadays)?

The Culture Wars and the Public Sphere in Post-Socialist Europe (Andrej Mirčev)

The talk examines the aesthetics of the cultural clashes between right- and left-wing politics. Focusing on how these clashes are carried out, performed, and mediated in the public sphere, it combines performance and gender studies, philosophy, and spatial theory.

Arguing that the dynamic of the current culture wars plays a central role in the creation of a public and counter-public sphere, the presentation surveys artistic and cultural performances in the context of post-socialist southeast Europe that have challenged traditional gender norms. The central idea that will be discussed is the concept of iconoclastic performances which serves as a discursive and epistemic tool for analysing the ongoing ideological struggle between democratic (liberal) and reactionary (conservative) forces after the collapse of socialism. Furthermore, the presentation will foreground the notion of the agonistic public sphere as it is discussed by the French philosopher Chantal Mouffe.

Andrej Mirčev (PhD) is a Berlin-based postdoc researcher and lecturer at several universities. His research focuses on spatial and image theory, intermediality, memory and archive, and critical performance theory. Parallel to his academic work, Andrej is active as a visual artist, dramaturge, and curator.

Public Art Projects in Rural Areas: Spaces for Encounters (Siglinde Lang)

(Contemporary) art in public spaces in villages, communities, and small towns is usually aimed at the local population and relates to local and regional circumstances and issues. With experimental impulses and participatory formats, these site-specific projects create space for encounters outside of everyday dialogue structures.

Based on theories and concepts that define rural areas in an interdisciplinary way, numerous examples are used to show the importance of rural art projects for strengthening democratic processes.

Siglinde Lang (PhD) is assistant professor at the Institute for Contemporary Art & Media at the Catholic Private University Linz. Her research focuses on Public Art & Participatory Art. In addition, she works as a curator, lecturer, and author.

Disarming Design: Politics of Participatory Practices (Annelys de Vet)

In our current political and economic landscape, sustaining an emancipatory design practice—one that aligns with progressive political beliefs and social values—poses significant challenges. How can political agency and public discourse be strengthened through participatory design processes in such a context? Annelys de Vet will explore this question through three long-term, self-directed participatory design projects: a series of books (Subjective Atlas series), a design label (Disarming Design from Palestine), and a master’s programme (Disarming Design at Sandberg Instituut). By reflecting on the journey of these projects from initiation to materialisation and from distribution to public impact, her presentation will offer an intimate, self-critical examination of the politics, tensions, and potential of participatory design practices in fostering public debate.

Aesthetics play a crucial role in these processes, shaping the sensory, material, and emotional dynamics of spaces, materials, and hospitality practices. At the core is a critical inquiry: How can design move beyond seeking ‘solutions’ to become a practice of agency and civil solidarity?

Annelys de Vet (PhD) is a Belgium-based Dutch designer, researcher, and educator with a practice for long-term, participatory design projects that engage with social and political struggles.

Recommended Literature

Basics

Block A

Block B

(Barbara Balen)

§ Moro, S. (2021.). *Mapping Paradigms in Modern and Contemporary Art – Poetic Cartography*, Routledge, London. 20–216).

(Ann Laenen)

- Laenen, A. & S. Kolgen, The social aspect of digital storytelling; a case study: Jefke Tuf, an interactive documentary about soul carers then and now in a former coalmining community. : *Cultural Mapping – Debating Spaces and Places*, 21-23 October 2015 Valletta
- Matarasso, F. (2019). *A Restless Art*. Caloust Gulbenkian Foundation.
- Van Mechelen, M., Gielen, M., Vanden Abeele, V. , Laenen, A. & Zamman, B (2015) *Challenging Group Dynamics in Participatory Design with Children: Lessons from Social Interdependence Theory*, IDC Conference.
- Van Mechelen, M., Verboven J. , Laenen, A., Willems, B., Geerts, D. & V. Vanden Abeele. (2016) *The GLID method: Moving from design features to underlying values in co-design*, in *Int. J. Human-Computer Studies* 97 (2017) 116–128.

Block C

Bridging Communities through Socially Engaged Art

About the talks:

- >> Title, CV (150 words), Pic, and Abstract (200 words) by 20 December 2024 to: s.lang@ku-linz.at
- >> Length: 45 minutes (about 30-minute talk, 15 minutes of questions...)
- >> Last slide should pose three (easy) questions – to be discussed (as input for discussion, 15 min.)
- >> Pictures, clips, and practical examples are highly appreciated...
- >> PDFs (of slides) are shared afterwards with all students and speakers
- >> Recommended literature (**1–2** articles about topic or articles of the speaker) will be forwarded to students afterwards.
- >> Written version of talk/article (about 20,000–25,000 characters) by 10 June 2025
(It is planned to publish the talks of the symposium)

Thanks for your cooperation!